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SUBJECT: THE ISLAMIC COMMUNITY IN TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED; PLEASE PROTECT ACCORDINGLY

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: The extradition this year to the U.S. of three Muslims (one a citizen of T&T and the other two from Guyana) to face trial for an alleged plot against JFK Airport has heightened interest in the state of Islam in Trinidad and Tobago. Various estimates at 6-10 percent of the population, those professing the Islamic faith are generally peaceful, productive and integrated into the society. Nonetheless, there are fundamentalists and some problematic ties to Middle Eastern and South Asian Islamic schools. Though we do not anticipate any major terrorist activity emanating from here, the existence of a relatively large Muslim population, sprinkled with a few radicals, also means that surprises and isolated future cases (like the JFK plot) can occur. End Summary.

A Numerical Minority

¶2. (SBU) Muslims in Trinidad number between 6-10 percent of the population (roughly 75,000-130,000 persons), enjoying full religious freedom to practice their faith, with the government declaring days such as Eid holidays. There are about 70 mosques in the country, some grander than others, but generally circumspect. These are found in all sorts of communities, including a mosque and Islamic Academy near the Embassy and across the street from an upscale shopping center. Following prayers, as an indication of the generally peaceful and integrated nature of congregations, some members of that mosque and their families can be found eating ice cream at the local Haagen-Dazs parlor in the shopping area.

A Lengthy History

¶3. (U) Islam was first introduced to T&T in the eighteenth century with the importation of African slaves who brought with them their religious beliefs. A second, more lasting, wave of Muslims came to the island with the arrival of workers from India beginning in 1845, who were brought to Trinidad once the British Empire outlawed the slave trade. While the majority of these workers were Hindu, some Muslims were also among them.

¶4. (U) The Indian Muslims brought with them a Sunni version of their faith known as Hanafi, which is generally seen as liberal and tolerant. Shi'ites also were represented but in much smaller numbers. Due perhaps to little interaction with mainstream Islamic thought during nineteenth and early twentieth century, Indian Muslims in Trinidad generally focused on the social aspects of their religion. They also continued the festivals and customs of their Indian heritage, such as the annual Hosay procession. Indian Muslims generally met with little interference from British authorities due to their relatively small numbers and peaceful nature. One exception was the 1884 Hosay Massacre, when nervous colonial troops fired on a large Indian procession, killing dozens and wounding hundreds.

Changing Times

¶5. (SBU) Despite continued growth of mosques and Islamic organizations throughout Trinidad, the homogeneity of Islamic thought here only began to change in the 1960s and 1970s with the arrival of missionaries from more fundamentalist sects. In particular, two groups, the Tablighs and the Wahabists, sought to reshape Islamic thought and practice on the island. The Tablighs, with foundations in India, and the Wahabists, funded in large part by Saudi Arabia, both espouse a more conservative and fundamentalist form of Islam than was the historic norm in Trinidad.

¶6. (U) Tabligh missionaries began arriving in Trinidad during the 1970s from India and Pakistan, bringing conservative cultural traditions, such as the wearing of hijab for women, which had previously been almost non-existent here. The Whhabist missionaries, who began appearing in the 1980's, continued this trend. While the occasional hijab is now visible, the Islamic mainstream in Trinidad has largely remained largely in line with its historic roots. Much more common for Muslim women is a headscarf or no covering.

Black Power Movement

¶7. (SBU) Understanding Islam in T&T also requires a look back at the "Black Power" movement of the 1960s and 1970's. Due to the relatively large migration of T&T citizens to North America, and the tenor of the times, some Afro-Trinidadians in the U.S. and Canada were attracted to Black Muslim organizations. Perhaps the most famous local offshoot of the Black Power movement is the Jamaat al Muslimeen (JAM), led by Yasin Abu Bakr, formerly known as Lennox Phillips.

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¶8. (SBU) Abu Bakr, a former police officer, led an unsuccessful coup in 1990. While the influence of JAM and Abu Bakr diminished after this attack, he remains a figure of some foreboding in society. Though "enjoying" the reputation of a radical with terrorist leanings (working off the popular conception of Abu Bakr, the JFK plotters hoped to gain funding from the JAM -- the organization supposedly wanted nothing to do with the alleged terrorists), and using this to help gain publicity and resources, the JAM now is alleged to be essentially a criminal gang, not a terrorist group and also involved on the fringes of local politics.

¶9. (SBU) Another group deserving of attention that has some local members is the Muslims of America (MOA). Members of the MOA include deportees from Canada and the U.S., Tyrone Cole and Wali Muhammad. These two Trinidadians were involved in planning a bombing in Toronto in 1994 and deported back to Trinidad in 2006.

Community Structure

¶10. (U) There are over 30 Muslim organizations in T&T, representing religious views of Trinidadian Muslims from the most conservative to those with a more secular bent. The Islamic Coordinating Council of Trinidad and Tobago serves as the organizing body of all local Muslim groups and is made up of four main organizations: the Anjuman Sunnat-ul-Jamaat Association (ASJA), the Trinidad Muslim League (TML), the United Islamic Organization (UIO) and the Trinidad Islamic Association (TIA). There are also many local Islamic organizations throughout the island focused on social interactions.

¶11. (SBU) The most influential of the larger bodies is the ASJA, which claims to represent over 80% of all Trinidad Muslims. Currently led by Imam Yacoob Ali, it promotes a moderate and inclusive form of Islam and seeks to educate Islamic youth in their heritage and traditions. The ASJA sees its educational thrust as important to help blunt more fundamentalist Islamic interpretations. An additional ASJA concern is the conversion of Afro-Trinidadians within the prison system to more radical views; the ASJA seeks to counter this by sending moderate clerics to prisons to teach the Koran. This effort, however, is hampered by the widespread

impression that the ASJA is more focused on Indo-Trinidadian Muslim concerns than those of its Afro-Trinidad fellow congregants.

¶12. (SBU) The other three main Islamic organizations are popularly seen as somewhat less moderate. ASJA leaders estimate that as many as 5,000 persons belong to these groups. The most vocal of them is the Trinidad Muslim League. The TML has petitioned the government in the past to become the official voice of Islam on the island although in actuality it represents only a small minority of Muslims. It is important to note, however, that all of the organizations under the Islamic Coordinating Council have denounced fringe groups like the JAM for alleged criminal activities and have promoted peaceful dialogue in resolving issues with others in society.

¶13. (SBU) Another small but noticeable Muslim group is the Ahmadiyyas. These Muslims are considered heretical by many other sects and are persecuted in many parts of the world. In Trinidad, while they are not considered part of the mainstream, they are generally tolerated by their fellow Muslims. The Ahmadiyyas frequently seek travel to the United States for religious study and international conferences.

Islamic Schools

¶14. (SBU) Islamic schooling is becoming more prevalent in Trinidad, due to the government funding of all religious schools. Catholic, Hindu, and Muslim schools all receive two-thirds of their funding from the government, which in turn requires a standardized curriculum. Most notable of these schools is the ASJA Boy's College in San Fernando, which has an enrollment of approximately 650. Some non-Muslim parents enroll their children in these schools due to their reputation for discipline and high learning standards.

¶15. (SBU) Though the majority of Islamic schools are simply that -- schools that also teach Islam -- there are some radical and fundamentalist academies. Notable in this regard is the Darul Uloom. It was founded in 1984 by Indo-Trinidadians who had been educated in religious schools in India and Pakistan and is part of the United Islamist Organization (UIO). The school claims an enrollment of approximately 200 girls and 200 boys, with strict separation, generally not the norm among Muslims in Trinidad. While the school maintains standard education in addition to religious training, its extremely conservative approach to Islamist thought has caused concern among many in the moderate Islamic community.

Trinidad as a hub of Islam in the Caribbean

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¶16. (U) Given its relative wealth and religious tolerance, Trinidad is considered by many as the nexus of Islam in the Caribbean. While Suriname and Guyana have greater Muslim populations, their relative isolation and lack of transportation infrastructure inhibit meetings or conferences. Trinidad, by contrast, offers many inter-island flights and reasonable conference facilities. As a result, it hosts many international Muslim conferences, which gives even greater prominence to moderate factions such as the ASJA. Conversely, this ease of travel has the potential to facilitate future extremist activities, such as the JFK Airport plot, both in Trinidad and the United States.

Comment: Some concerns, but not many

¶17. (SBU) Some Muslims with radical views live in T&T and a few schools are outside the mainstream. In addition, some students go abroad to study in madrasses in the Middle East, South Asia, and occasionally South Africa. There also are known contacts among local Muslim radicals and others with similar views in the Caribbean, and missionaries do visit here from outside the region. That said, given the general nature of the Muslim community and its integration into society, the likelihood of a large radical movement gaining steam here -- as opposed to a radical few potentially

arising -- is very small.

AUSTIN